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ABSTRACT

Cultural studies aims to critique and challenge existing boundaries. Particularly relevant to a discussion of cultural studies in the context of composition pedagogy are the boundaries that exist between minority and dominant cultures, between disciplines, between academic and street cultures, between ethnicities, races, genders and classes, between student texts, literary texts, and other texts, and between representation and the represented. In an upper-level composition course, a writing project shows several cases where students consciously construct representations of their cultural experiences. Most recognize the destabilization of their identities for the first time and consequently do not feel comfortable. One American student of Puerto Rican descent finds herself troubled over her ethnicity. Working from a government-type definition of "Puerto Rican," she realizes that she cannot define herself as such, but then after reading an assigned author, she nevertheless concludes the opposite, that she may well be "Puerto Rican." Another student feels a lack of empowerment because she has no definitive ethnic identity. African American students often find it difficult to identify with immigrants and with assimilation models since their ancestors were involuntary immigrants. To help students become more aware of how concepts and paradigms, such as those describing race and ethnicity, come into being, they should become familiar with the thinking, interrogating, and writing of concepts and of representation. Using the framework of postructuralism, students could consider the representation of various cultures rather than that they are autonomous entities with origins. (TB)

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'Emergent Discourses:' Student Exploration of Cultural Identities

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As my colleagues, Rob Friedman and Eileen Ferretti show, reader-response theory and Foucault's work provide theoretical frameworks that have important pedagogical implications. Similarly, I will suggest that Cultural Studies offers applications for pedagogical approaches. Each of these theories addresses the notion of boundaries and the movement between them, or transgression. Eileen explored the confrontations and conflicts between students and literary texts through role-playing. Rob, however, presented a method to distinguish between voices of institution and inclination by having students adopt personae.

Cultural studies aims to critique and to challenge existing boundaries. Particularly relevant to this discussion are the boundaries such as those that exist between minority and dominant cultures, between disciplines (even within disciplines: Literary and Composition Studies), between academic and street cultures, between ethnicities, races, genders and classes, between student texts, literary texts and other texts and between representation and the represented. Thus, cultural studies is interdisciplinary, intertextual, multicultural, and inclusionary. These qualities of cultural studies help foster a space for the 'emergent discourses' of our marginalized students.

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Changes in student population since the 1960's, that is, the inclusion of "previously

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marginalized or underrepresented in institutions of higher education," contributed to emergence of cultural studies in the academic world (Bathrick "Cultural Studies" 321). The changes brought on by the open admissions policy in CUNY, shaped by historical political, economic and social forces, attests to the rise of this new population. Similarly, my own pedagogical methods have been influenced by Baruch College's culturally diverse student population.

Paula Gunn Allen's term and article, "'border' studies," describes the experience of many of our minority and marginalized students. While arguing for a new kind of criticism, Allen elucidates the complexity of marginal identity and its multiplicity: "The process of living on the border, of crossing and recrossing boundaries of consciousness is most clearly delineated in work by writers who are citizens of more than one community. . ." Their lives, she writes, involve multiculturality, multilinguality, and class-crossing (305). When our students arrive to the classroom from the factory or construction site, from their home in Chinatown, or from the streets of Bensonhurst, we witness border crossings firsthand. For Allen, women writers of color embody an empowering creativity that dismisses their marginal status within the dominant culture. The critical system she offers, much like cultural criticism, based on "the principle of inclusion. . . [and] on actual human society and relationships," is relevant to our students' experiences.

Although very useful, Allen, like most of those who have written about the cultural studies classroom, is preoccupied with the issues of the canon, that is, with literature and with our students' process of reading and making meaning not with their process of composing. Terry Dean lucidly argues that "when we teach composition, we are teaching

culture" (24). And his work is an exception to much of what has been written about the cultural studies classroom. Very few attempts have been made to acknowledge the marginality of the multicultural student experience and to view students' writing as literary texts or cultural artifacts. Even fewer attempts have been made to create cultural critics of our students.

Such a multi-level approach which realizes the spirit of cultural studies would involve a project like the one I will describe. Student writing specifically involved with the research process in the upper level composition course can use sources (the other "voices"), to interrogate, interpret, and sometimes subvert important concepts and terms of identification. The project centers around the dominant issues of ethnicity, race and the immigrant experience in America. Rather than describe this project in detail, I would like to you to hear the students' voices. We shall see how students consciously construct representations of their cultural experience.

Border crossings are most explicitly revealed in some students' struggle for a stable ethnic or racial identity. Some recognize the indeterminacy of such identities and feel comfortable discussing it. For instance, Sharon's cultural background includes: Native American (Cherokee), French-Canadian, English, Irish, German and Afro-American. She is often mistaken for a Syrian Jew, Italian or Hispanic. She writes in her conclusion: "I do not think that I could consider myself one nationality. I know that I feel comfortable in any ethnic group, either it be all Caucasian, all Afro-American or even Chinese."

Most recognize the destabilization of their identities for the first time and subsequently do not feel comfort. For instance, we can discern the struggle for ethnic

identity by Puerto-Rican students. If they are born in Puerto Rico they are American citizens and the process of immigration is a legal, not a cultural, difference. Tabitha, for instance, tries to explain:

> You see, I feel like a Puerto Rican in America because, among other things, I can read, write, and speak some Spanish and because my family eats Spanish food. But I don't feel like a Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico because again, among other things, I can't speak Spanish fluently. I don't know much about the country itself and I don't recognize half the foods they serve. So you see, I don't consider myself a true Puerto Rican but I don't consider myself a true "American" either. To my surprise, however, according to Berle, I am a Puerto Rican.

What follows is a recapitulation (by Berle--her source) of the U.S. Bureau of Census' definition of a Puerto Rican. Not only is Tabitha's confusion about her ethnic identity remarkable, but so is her reliance on a government agency to define her. She surrounds the word, American, with quotation marks as if to distance herself from this identity, but then she is surprised she is defined as a Puerto Rican. Although she does not explicitly contest the Census Bureau's definition, she subtly realizes that the text does not necessarily correspond to the body (herself). Like we saw with Sharon, this fluid movement in and out of cultural identifications is a recognition of border crossings. It is also important to note how sources are used here: Tabitha explains her status first then ends with the source reference of Berle. Similarly, another student, Jennifer exhibits confusion about her Puerto Rican identity. Like Tabitha, Jennifer must depend upon a definition by others. After two paragraphs of direct

quotation and before another extended quotation, she squeezes in the question, "Who am I?" Both Tabitha and Jennifer, as we have seen, move between identities.

While some students are engaged in acts of empowerment through their heightened sensitivity of ethnic and racial identities and the intrusion of the dominant culture, others feel a lack of empowerment and exhibit a profound quest for identity. One student, Zoe, discovers that she has no definitive ethnic identity. Two factors contributed to this: her lack of a permanent home, and her lack of contact with her father's French culture and her mother's Jewish background. As a result, she writes:

> To this day I have difficulty with my specific cultural identity, I am an American, I love to visit the France of my father's birth, I want to be Jewish. The stress on our relationship with my maternal grandparents was on celebrating Hanukkah and Passover, but only in terms of Jewish food. We had Passover Seders with their friends, but many of the symbols were forgotten. . . . I remember visiting my maternal grandparents in Florida one Hanukkah. We played with the dreydahl and tried to win the little chocolate candies symbolic of the holiday. When we went to bed, however, I hung a stocking by my window for Santa Claus and his Christmas offerings. [she concludes: I want to be more religious than my parents were and I want to bring up my children with a greater sense of cultural identity and roots.]

This is one of the most vivid illustrations of the fluid movement between ethnicities some students experience. Zoe is distinctly aware that she can participate in different cultures to her liking and chooses certain symbols .

Zoe's case subtly points to a more pervasive problematic. That is, while emergent voices are strengthened in such a writing project, dominant voices are decentered. The tables are turned on the students who feel they lack a specific cultural identity. They may be of mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds, or they may be the fifth generation of their family. This supposed lack of ethnic or racial identity makes me question whether we idealize the adherence to a culture too much especially when their histories come out sounding like an encyclopedia. It may be obvious, but it seems that the further distanced students are from their origins, the more dependent they are on sources, and the less dependent on personal experience.

Or perhaps these students are what Talcott Parsons calls "desocialized." Desocialization is a term which Parsons' borrows from David Schneider's book *American Kinship*. In this study, Parsons tells us, Schneider discovers that "however strongly affirmative these ethnic identifications are, the ethnic status is conspicuously devoid of 'social content' . . . .(and in Schneider's words:) 'The marks of identity are in a very important sense "empty symbols." Symbols empty of elaborate social distinctions, and thus they are able to function freely and smoothly in this multi-ethnic social system while maintaining a distinct cultural-symbolic identity as markers (65). Cultural studies grapples with these possibilities and perhaps we might add its post-structuralist critique of stable identity, or notions of indeterminacy to interpret what occurs with such student responses. Perhaps you even have other ideas; I'd like to hear them.

A similar, and also hard to define, problematic is seen in the writings of African-American students. Sometimes these students are treated as an ethnic group and are

expected to conform to the assimilation models of the European ethnic groups--and this is not only insensitive, but dangerous. The students are unable to identify with immigrants and with assimilation models since their ancestors were involuntary immigrants and they have a recent history of a separatist movement. Their history dates back to slavery in the United States, unlike the recent immigration of many Asian students. Thus, they have the longest history in America. Yet they also feel excluded from American history and confront this dilemma in their writing (The title of one student's paper is "Ethnic Identity and Miseducation"). Non-American black students, i.e. from Jamaica, Haiti, Ghana, Nigeria, Antigua, Trinidad, do not have this problem. They easily identify with the country of their origin and write about its cultural history.

Three of these students identify themselves as an ethnic group with the term "African-American" and by focusing their research on Africa. The other three claim a racial identity by using the terms, "black" and "Black American" and by tracing their progress as a race from slavery until the present, writing mostly about the civil rights movement. These terms of identification correspond to the students' conception of their cultural history. For the post-structuralists, Mary Poovey informs us, these terms of identification are "culturally laden signifiers" (623). From the sociological point of view, Talcott Parsons calls the change from "Negro" to "Black" to "African-American" "significant shifts in symbolism" (71). "The designations of racial groups by color," he argues, "are themselves cultural symbols (74).

[At a multicultural forum at Baruch, Dr. Leonard Jeffries expressed concern over empty symbols. His black students show him earrings of Nefertiti, a symbol of the African origins of civilization. He tells them that before they buy the earrings, read the books, gain

knowledge and understand the symbol.]

These six student's writings contribute to the debate concerning the identity of African-Americans as a racial or an ethnic group. Writing in the early 1970's, the sociologist, Martin Kilson argues that the ethnicization of blacks is a form of legitimation and gives blacks the cultural background they need for a higher status ("Blacks and Neo-Ethnicity"). More recent writings of the 1980's, such as the work of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, show that the rearticulated racialization of blacks is empowering (*Racial Formation*). For race relations today this debate over identity will be prominent.

Students as Cultural Critics

To help students become more aware of how concepts and paradigms, such as those describing race and ethnicity, come into being they should become familiar with the thinking, interrogating, and writing of concepts and of representation. Finding multiple definitions of ethnicity, or race, for example, would provide students with a greater awareness in how carefully concepts are constructed. Researching concepts would entail an historical component which Mary Poovey argues for (623). Students could look at what has been included and excluded in the artificially homogenized concepts of race, ethnicity, culture, the immigrant experience and being American. Certain theories of race and ethnicity could present the social constructionist and the essentialist views.

Using the framework of post-structuralism we would consider the representation of various cultures rather than that they are autonomous entities with origins. For political or other purposes, a culture may be represented differently at any given moment in time. When students are asked to survey their own culture and particularize their accounts, the

processes of inclusion and exclusion are enacted. What must be asked is why they choose to represent their culture in a certain way.

Conclusion

The cultural studies classroom can be the site of 'emergent discourses' where silenced and oppressed voices can be heard. As teachers, we can foster the emergence of these voices and aid the striving for empowerment. We can give multicultural students an opportunity to write about border crossings between their classroom and community environments, or between their languages and dialects. And we can confront borders of ethnicity and race with the issue of acculturation.

It is necessary to achieve awareness of the complexity of our students' identities--in which ethnicity and race play very large roles. For our immigrant students, especially, their struggle with acculturation is a daily reality. Whether we use ethnographic or cultural studies approaches in our classroom, we cannot easily dismiss or categorically reduce to the term "multiculturalism" what goes on in our students border crossings. Most important, our role as teachers, as Terry Dean succinctly refers, are as "monocultural" and this is an imp issue. We participate, however reluctantly or gratefully, to the classroom as a site of cultural diversity.

The author would greatly appreciate responses to this conference paper and to know whether it is being used in research. Please contact her at the City University of New York Graduate School, Ph.D Program in English, 33 West 42nd Street, New York, New York 10036. After late-1996, contact her through ERIC.

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